CAPTAIN GEORGE'S
Penny Dreadful
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THE SPIDER'S WEB
Based upon "THE SPIDER" MAGAZINE STORIES
TANGLING WITH CRIME'S MOST FRIGHTFUL MONSTER!
with
WARREN HULL
IRIS MEREDITH
RICHARD FISKE
Screen play by ROBERT E. KENT • BASIL DICKEY
GEORGE PLYMPTON • MARTIE VERNON
Directed by RAY TAYLOR and JAMES W. HORNE
A COLUMBIA CHAPTER PLAY

A WEEKLY REVIEW

DON HUTCHISON

Many of us who grew up watching the studio films of the 1940s have a special affection for a movie team that was not really a team at all--Sydney Greenstreet and Peter Lorre.

Unlike Rathbone and Bruce, the deadly duo of Greenstreet and Lorre did not appear in any series together but were merely Warner Brothers contract players who sometimes acted in the same movies. Even so, more than three decades since they skulked through that silvery studio fog together, they are chiefly remembered as a team, even to being known as 'the Laurel and Hardy of crime.'

Ted Sennett (author of WARNER BROTHERS PRESENTS, a tribute to the studio) has recognized this fact in a new book titled MASTERS OF MENACE: GREENSTREET AND LORRE, a Dutton Paperback Original. Sennett's book, illustrated with nearly a hundred photographs, tells their story in five self-explanatory chapters: The Sinister Duo, Before The Falcon, That Beautiful Black Bird, After The Falcon--Their Films Together and Greenstreet and Lorre: Their Films Apart. In addition, there are praiseworthy filmographies, a bibliography, and a complete index.

The chapter on The Maltese Falcon is particularly interesting, indicating that a complete book on that classic would be worthwhile since there were many things about it that make it unique among movies. (The work of an untested director, the Falcon was completed in two months at a cost of less than $300,000. Before its release, the studio had so little faith in its box-office appeal that they wanted to re-title it 'The Gent From Frisco'.)

MASTERS OF MENACE is for all of us who ever took delight in that peculiar blend of charming benignity, humor, decadence, and homicidal malevolence that were the trademarks of those two consummate but ofter underrated actors.

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In November of 1978, the British Broadcasting Corporation aired a series of six educational programs under the title Crime Writers. To the best of my knowledge, the series has yet to appear on North American television. What has appeared, however, is a book based on the programs, published by the BBC itself. The book is titled CRIME WRITERS (surprise) and has been imported into Canada by Methuen Publications. Crime Writers does not pretend to be a definitive history of crime literature (all that has been done before) but is about the writers of crime fiction themselves. It's well done, and belongs on the same shelf as Howard Haycraft's MURDER FOR PLEASURE, Francis Nevins' THE MYSTERY WRITER'S ART, and Steinbrunner and Penzler's ENCYCLOPEDIA OF MYSTERY & DETECTION. I recommend it to all readers who--like myself--find this sort of thing to be irresistible nourishment.

CAPTAIN GEORGE'S PENNY DREADFUL, a weekly review established in 1968, is published by the Vast Whizzbang Organization at Memory Lane, 594 Markham Street, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

DON MILLER

ANOTHER REPUBLIC SUMMER III: No getting around the fact that when it came to horror thrillers, Republic was far outclassed by Val Lewton's RKOs, and Universal, and even Columbia. Even PRC tried harder with horror, if with questionable results. There was something about the Republic production setup--they were just too doggone straightforward and honest to waste time in whispering "Boo!" from the shadows. Their scare output was meagre, and the effectiveness minimal, although a couple of them had moments of interest.

They started early in the game, too. One of the earliest releases, in fact, was The Crime of Dr. Crespi, claimed to have been inspired by Edgar Allan Poe's "Premature Burial" but owing little to it. The pic was made in New York and came out in the fall of 1935. Reportedly filmed in eight days, it starred Erich von Stroheim, who later was quoted as saying: "The Crime of Dr. Crespi was also the crime of Republic, the producer and the screenwriter!" Well, it wasn't quite that bad, primarily because of the star.

Lots of mysteries but not much in the way of spine-tinglers thereafter, until Stroheim returned to the studio for The Lady and the Monster in 1944, mentioned last time as the vehicle for the introduction of Vera Hruba Ralston as a dramatic actress. It didn't work out, nor did the picture, more a suspense story with a medical-science background. Again, Stroheim made it worthwhile, and so did John Alton's lighting trickery in turning Richard Arlen into a killer, great lensing.

Since most of the other studios were turning out thrillers prolifically, Republic probably felt obliged to join in, though half-heartedly. They produced a pair in 1945, played them on a double bill and quietly let them pass. Better of the two was The Phantom Speaks, with Stanley Ridges doing a number as a doctor who inherits the personality of an executed killer and promptly goes on a murder spree. Ridges had previously done something awfully similar over at Universal, Black Friday in 1940, so the feeling persisted that all this had been seen before. However, for what it was, it was okay.

Accompanying it was The Vampire's Ghost, with John Abbott as a ghoul who punctures some necks in Africa. Weak stuff, with a running time of 59 minutes its main asset.

Early in 1946, Republic released The Woman Who Came Back, independently produced by Walter Colmes, all about some purported witchcraft in modern New England. Gothic rigmarole, but competently managed, helped by troupers like Nancy Kelly, John Loder, Otto Kruger and Ruth Ford.

Later the same year came the final Republic dual horror bill, consisting of Catman of Paris and Valley of the Zombies. The former had Carl Esmond slowly going bananas wondering whether he's been cutting up people, while the latter had Ian Keith as a hammy zombie. Catman of Paris was fun because right in the middle, it was as if director Lesley Selander couldn't stand it any longer: "Gotta have a rumble here!" and a real barrom brawl develops for no reason, just like in the Red Ryders. Blood, they say, will tell.

PETE HARRIS

ON THE AIR: Some types of mass entertainment have universal appeal, while others are definitely not good international travelers. Movies are an obvious example of the first category and radio is a prime example of the latter. With few exceptions, radio heroes and personalities are seldom if ever well known outside their own borders. (For the purposes of this particular discussion, I exclude here the massive influx of U. S. radio shows into Canada in the 1930s and 40s, which is an entirely different story.) One of those exceptions, I'd say, would be Britain's Dick Barton--Special Agent, an adventure series which went on the air at 6:45 p. m. Monday, Oct. 7, 1946, as a presentation of the BBC Light Programme.

Recently, on a local remainder table, I found a hardcover volume outlining the broadcasting history of Dick Barton and offering novelizations of three scripts from the series--Dick Barton and The Secret Weapon, Dick Barton and The Cabatolin Diamonds, and Dick Barton and The Lucifer Adventure. The book's author, Elwyn Jones (described as "founder" of Z Cars, among other credits), has, in addition to the script novelizations, provided dossiers on the series' three continuing characters--Barton, Jock Anderson and Snowey White, and the 13 Rules of Conduct which governed Barton's behavior--e. g. "Barton's violence is restricted to clean socks on the jaw. The refinements of unarmed combat taught to British Commandos cannot be practised by him or by his colleagues. When involved in a brawl which ends in victory for the Barton side, he must be equally matched or outnumbered."

According to the book's introduction, Radio Times described Dick Barton--Special Agent as "'the first daily serial thriller written for broadcasting.' It forebore to add 'in this country' though the daily soap opera (sic)--domestic, detective, Western, romantic--had long flourished wherever radio was commercial."

Author Jones goes on to say: "Though Dick Barton the character did not change, the star of the show did three times... played first by Noel Johnson; from February 1949 by Duncan Carse; and from October 1950, until the run ended on 31 March, 1951, by Gordon Davies. Jock and Snowey were played throughout by Alex McCrindle and John Mann respectively... the famous Barton signature tune was The Devil's Gallop by Charles Williams..."

The success of the series was immediate and within a month Dick Barton was receiving 200 fan letters a week, and 2,000 within six months. By April, 1947, the audience averaged 15 million. Three feature films were made, with Don Stannard as Barton--Dick Barton Special Agent (1948), Dick Barton Strikes Back (1949) and Dick Barton At Bay (1950).

If you're interested in trying to track down the book, it was published in 1977 by Arthur Baker Ltd., London, and is entitled, obviously enough, Dick Barton--Special Agent. The dust jacket bears a priceless cartoon showing applicants for a BBC Dick Barton audition--one of whom is Rip Kirby.